Writer’s Note

A Life Well Spent grew out of experiences that have become more personal to me as I've gotten older. My grandmother had Alzheimer's, and my wife's grandmother had dementia. I've seen what happens when someone you love begins forgetting important parts of their life or no longer recognizes the people closest to them. There is something especially painful about sharing decades of history with someone and realizing that the history may still belong to you, but no longer belongs to them.

My wife and I also have aging parents. They are healthy and independent, but we've had the conversations I suspect a lot of families eventually have about what would happen if that changed. Assisted living and memory care can be extraordinarily expensive, and I honestly don't know how we would afford the kind of care we would want to provide if one of our parents suddenly needed it. That fear became just as important to the story as the fear of dementia itself.

That's where Sam Frost came from. His wife, Grace, needs expensive memory care, and Sam discovers a company willing to pay elderly people for their memories. He begins by convincing himself that he can sell the ones that don't matter very much.

The problem is that memories don't divide themselves that neatly. The painful ones, embarrassing ones, funny ones, and seemingly insignificant ones all become tangled up with the people we love and the person we became. A memory of an ordinary afternoon might seem worthless until you realize it contains someone's laugh, the way a room smelled, or some tiny detail that explains why another person matters to you.

The technology in the story also makes an important distinction between remembering something and feeling it. Sam doesn't necessarily lose the facts of a memory when he sells it. He can still know what happened, where he was, or who was there. What disappears is the emotional and sensory experience attached to it. The memory becomes information. He knows that he loved someone without necessarily being able to reach the feeling of loving them. That idea frightened me much more than simple forgetting.

I set the story slightly in the future because advances in brain-computer interfaces, medicine, artificial intelligence, and neuroscience have made ideas that once felt like distant science fiction seem less impossible. But I was never particularly interested in writing a story about the mechanics of extracting memories. The technology gave me a way to ask a much more personal question: what are our memories actually worth?

For all of that, I didn't want the screenplay to be relentlessly sad. Sam has a dry sense of humor, and there is something inherently absurd about a corporation putting a price on the most intimate experiences of a person's life. The Memory Bank approaches love, trauma, courage, grief, and nostalgia as products with different market values. I liked letting the ridiculous business of buying and selling human experience sit right beside the very real reasons Sam agrees to participate in it.

The friendship between Sam and Curtis became especially important while I was writing. Curtis understands the difference between knowing facts about someone and actually remembering why that person matters to you. That became one of the simplest ways for me to think about the entire premise. A name, a date, or an event can survive as information even after the emotional connection to it has disappeared.

A Life Well Spent goes to some painful places, but I didn't want it to become hopeless. I wanted to leave open the possibility that the connections we build over a lifetime may be more complicated than our ability to consciously retrieve them. Memory can disappear. Feeling can disappear. I'm less certain that everything two people have meant to one another disappears quite so easily.